



COMMISSIONER'S UPDATE

Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission

27 Wormwood Street, Boston, MA 02210

August 2003

Commissioner's Message



I am pleased to once again communicate with you during this time of rapid change. I want to keep all of our constituents updated on pertinent issues and events whenever possible. It is also my pleasure to report that Ronald Preston, Secretary of the Executive Office of Health & Human Services, has confirmed that I will continue serving as the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. I am both honored and gratified by this request and I look forward to continue working with the fine group of dedicated professionals we have in our agency.

The nation's economic downturn has had an effect on most agency programs. During the past 6 months, MRC has experienced the implementation of an organizational restructuring. As with any major change, the transition has been challenging. These changes have come about as a result of a lack of federal funding. Despite inadequate funding increases and the adjustments required, staff continue to stay focused and committed to MRC consumers, utilizing every resource available. Our mission will never be compromised.

The MRC has changed its organizational structure from operating as "divisions" to the following five programs and departments: Community Services, Disability Determination Services, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Commissioner's Office and Administration and Finance. Each of these functions has been reorganized in order to group similar services together and aid in necessary consolidation.

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Kudos must be bestowed upon the employees of the Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) Program. The waiting list for services has been reduced from being for an “indefinite period of time” to four months, primarily due to the reduction in personnel which has taken place during the past 18 months. Thanks to staff commitment, discipline and resourcefulness in times of budget constraints, we are now able to serve consumers in a timelier manner.

At this point in time, the future of the Federal Public VR Program is of concern. The Rehabilitation Act Reauthorization is pending and its passage could be detrimental to VR’s present state. It has been proposed to use Rehabilitation Act monies for funding One-Stop infrastructure activities. VR advocates would like to see the program be exempt from the “set aside” requirements because of its unique status in the community. The bill could come up for debate at any time. We are told the US Senate is aware and supportive of these concerns and will attempt to make the necessary changes to the bill.

MRC’s Community Services (CS) Program, formerly the Independent Living Division, now consists of the Statewide Head Injury Program, Home Care Assistance, Protective Services, Housing Services, Independent Living Services, Consumer Involvement, Supported and Extended Employment Services and Assistive Technology. The goal of this reorganization is to improve collaboration among departments and individuals

as well as introduce innovative and cross-discipline problem-solving methods in order to enhance both business performance and consumer outcomes.

Recent Medicaid Waiver initiatives at the MRC have been a topic of great interest to us, as well as the recently passed legislation regarding EOHHS reorganization, placing the MRC in the Disability and Community Services Office. Within this Office, MRC has the opportunity to further build its Community Services Program through some type of Medicaid Community-Based Waiver. The new monies generated from this waiver would be used to expand needed services.

For Fiscal Year 2004, the MRC state-funded programs did as well as one could hope. Given this time of great fiscal uncertainty and budgetary constraints, service and staffing levels will be maintained with little or no growth.

My intention is to keep readers informed of matters having an impact on programs, services and individuals associated with the MRC. As our organization moves with the tides of change, we continue to uphold the values that define us. We are here to provide the highest possible quality of services to people with disabilities and I believe we are doing the best we can with the resources available to us. We will manage our destiny in a time of evolution and continue to make a difference in the lives of the citizens we serve.

Elmer C. Bartels
Commissioner

Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program News

The past year has been a time of significant change for the VRS field operations. First, on January 1, 2003, we implemented a three-region structure, down from 5 regions. This required expanded roles for our Regional Directors and the creation of a new position - Assistant Commissioner of VR Field Operations. While the above activities were in progress, we were also addressing caseload coverage issues. Unit Supervisors formally assumed full-time or partial caseload responsibilities. We also transferred cases from one office to another to achieve a better balance in terms of personnel utilization. Finally, staff concentrated on closing individual cases deemed inactive after consultation with each consumer.

Our VRS Program goal has been to maximize purchase of service dollars for consumers and thereby reduce the size of the waiting list. In order to accomplish this, a complete hiring freeze was implemented. During the past 1½ years, VR staffing has decreased by more than 90 FTE's, but caseloads have only decreased by 30. While this has placed a strain on some offices due to uneven staff losses, it has now allowed us to reduce time spent on the consumer waiting list to approximately four months.

This is a most noteworthy accomplishment for MRC consumers and staff. When a consumer completes an application, we are now able to reasonably predict when services may be provided. With the cooperative work of numerous MRC staff, we can analyze VR expenditures and make releases to the waiting list accordingly. The agency does not

want to have an extended waiting list again and fully anticipates providing a more evenly paced service delivery system into the next fiscal year.

Federal funding levels have hampered our achievements in terms of the number of successful rehabilitation outcomes. The Order of Selection regulations had a major effect regarding consumers who needed more services over an extended period of time. Our measure of success continues to be based upon the number of persons with disabilities who are returning to or entering competitive work; thus, successful rehabilitations remain the number one priority for the VR Services Program.

In summary, FY 2003 has been a time of significant change. The good news is that we have achieved a new level of stability, accommodated reduced staffing levels, addressed the issue of the waiting list and have managed our monies in such a fashion as to avoid future extended waiting lists. We can now refocus our efforts on measurable, successful outcomes. As always, the emphasis of the VRS Program will be on the development of consumer skills in order to maximize the number of persons with disabilities going to work.

*Kasper Goshgarian
Deputy Commissioner
Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program*

Community Services Program News

This has been a very difficult, yet exciting year for the Community Services (CS) Program. We have gone through a name change (formerly the Independent Living Division), increased our program responsibilities and dealt with many budget crises brought about by fiscal woes in Massachusetts and throughout the nation.

In spite of this, we are taking on even more work and are examining new ways to enhance the provision of community-based support services. For example, CS staff are meeting with Information Technology staff who will assist us in developing a unified database of all CS Program consumers. Eventually, this database will be merged into the overall MRCIS system, the VRS client database, creating one master database of agency consumers.

We are also finishing up our year with last minute amendments to vendor contracts to ensure all consumer services are funded. In addition, revenue collections for the Medicaid Retained Revenue Account are progressing nicely and we expect to meet our \$2M target for the fiscal year. This revenue account helps cover rate increases for home care assistants and pays for some of the Turning 22 consumers. We spend over \$600,000 annually from this account to fund services for these consumers.

The Brain Injury Waiver is another revenue project on which we are working and expect to bring \$1,000,000 into the State Treasury this year alone.

All in all, this has been a busy year with many changes to our budget and program structure. Hats off to all staff in the Community Services Program for their professionalism and teamwork. We have finished out the year in a manner that is a credit to the Commission and the consumers we serve.

John Chappell
Deputy Commissioner
Community Services Program

Calling All Cell Phones!

A new program sponsored by Sprint Project Connect could help MRC consumers. To participate, drop-off old cell phones at any participating Sprint store or Easter Seals location. The phones are resold or recycled and a portion of the profits will be donated to the National Organization on Disability and Easter Seals. So...gather all those unused or old cell phones that are collecting dust and put them to good use. For more information visit www.nod.org.



Disability Determination Services Program News

For Federal Fiscal Year 2003, the Massachusetts Disability Determination Services (DDS) Program had a workload target of 78,769 cases. In recent weeks, the targeted workload has increased to 80,900 cases. Of the 80,900 cases, 15,300 are Continuing Disability Review cases. Through week 39 ending June 27, 2003, the DDS had processed 61,510 cases or 76% of the budgeted workload. At this point, we are well poised to meet the workload target for the FFY'03.

In terms of Continuing Disability Review (CDR) cases, through week 39 we processed 13,367 cases, or 82.6% of the budgeted CDR workload of 15,300 cases. As with the overall workload, we will also meet this target. To date, we have achieved a Production Per Work Year of 324.8 and an Adjusted Production Per Work Year of 273.4. This compares favorably with the national averages of 268.9 and 262.3.

The Massachusetts DDS continues to do an outstanding job in terms of productivity and remains a national leader in this regard. Our accomplishments were recently recognized with the recent presentation of an SSA Commissioner's Award, the Social Security Administration's highest honor.

We continue to work on moving from the current Wang computer system to a new, more advanced IBM AS400 platform. Implementation of the major system modules have been completed. Delays currently are a result of backlogs on the part of the software vendor.

By this September, we will be replacing all personnel workstations within the entire

DDS. The newer modern equipment will allow for more sophisticated work applications, including the processing of an automated application form.

During this period, the DDS trained a group of examiners in the completion of the Residual Functional Capacity (RFC) Form. The form, previously completed only by DDS medical doctors, provides medical evidence required to determine a claimant's ability to perform work-related tasks. The trained examiners have already begun successfully completing the assessments, substantially increasing the professionalism of DDS Disability Examiners.

The MRC-DDS continues to provide support for the entire region and has completed cases for a number of other states. This assistance has been invaluable to the SSA since many states are understaffed due to state hiring restrictions. In summary, the DDS has had a most productive year.

*Kasper Goshgarian
Deputy Commissioner
Disability Determination Services Program*

FAST FACT

Of the 3.7 million people in Massachusetts between the ages of 21-64, approximately 18% are people with disabilities.

There's No Place Like Home

MRC's Home Modification Loan Program makes a difference in the lives of many. A house on the corner with black shutters, a white picket fence, roses growing in the back yard and a shiny new car. Pursuing the quintessential "American Dream" can now become a potential reality for over 500 Massachusetts residents. Thanks to the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission's Home Modification Loan Program, people with disabilities have access to funds necessary for renovating homes of their own.

In the past, funding had gone toward group homes and subsidized apartment buildings housing people with lower incomes and disabilities. Oftentimes after an injury or diagnosis of a disabling medical condition, a person with a disability is unable to stay in their home because of the costly renovations needed to accommodate their new lifestyle. Wheelchair ramps, elevators or chair lifts, handrails, bathroom and shower modifications, or other simple adjustments such as widening doorways or lowering sinks and stoves are just a few examples of the types of renovations for which loans may be used. Many of the everyday tasks people without disabilities take for granted become time-consuming, stressful challenges for people with disabilities. Thus, home modifications can mean the difference between autonomy and dependence.

Such was the case with Mr. Donald Ellis of Framingham. More than two years ago, Donald sustained a stroke, leaving his left side paralyzed. After one month at Mass



metro-west rehab facility, Medicare coverage ran out and he was forced to transfer to a nursing home. It had become impossible to bring him home since he needed full-time care and his home was not wheelchair accessible. Though the nursing home provided him with care and support, the atmosphere was discouraging. For most people, being in their own home is the most therapeutic place for recovery. After living 36 years in this house, it looked as if Donald and his wife Carol would have to move.

Fortunately, Carol found information about MRC's Home Modification Loan Program (HMLP). She was able to acquire a \$25,000 loan with a 3% interest rate that would allow her to modify their home. Through the HMLP, the Ellis' were able to finance an electric chair lift and create a wheelchair accessible shower.

"I'm a lot better than a year ago," says Donald. "I couldn't have existed without those modifications. Without the electric chair lift, Carol couldn't have helped me up the stairs."

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General Hospital and a three-month stay in a



National Disability Mentoring Day

National Disability Mentoring Day (NDMD), a partnership between MRC and the U.S. Department of Labor, will take place October 15, 2003. This day is a career exploration opportunity for people with disabilities who want to experience real work situations first-hand. The purpose of NDMD is to raise awareness about vocational rehabilitation to employers and the community. NDMD provides an opportunity to match the needs of consumers with the needs of employers. It offers the chance to discuss potential internships, job openings and the development of mentor relationships.

The month of October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Companies throughout the nation are providing a variety of programs for the purpose of educating their employees on the importance of accessibility in the workplace. NDMD enables consumers to spend part of the day with a volunteer mentor. At the same time, the mentor learns more about the experience of persons with disabilities and gets to meet potential future employees. Last year, MRC paired up with Hewlett Packard (HP) for this important day. HP is a leading global provider of technologies and services to consumers and businesses. This will be the third year that HP has participated in NDMD.

Last year, the key goals of HP were to increase employee awareness concerning issues faced by persons with disabilities as well as technology that is accessible to them. HP conducted discussions and presentations to promote diversity within the company and

among employees who work with customers with disabilities. The presentations covered a variety of topics including the use of American Sign Language and how people with disabilities effectively use technology to enhance their independence.

HP employees have varied backgrounds in engineering, human resources, marketing and business supply chain management. They can provide participants with valuable career planning ideas, as well as offer a first-hand look at the work environment. "We are proud to open our doors to young people in our communities who hope to work for companies like HP - companies that recognize and value the skills, hopes and contributions of working people with disabilities," said Michael Takemura, director of the HP Accessibility Program Office.

HP is aware that in order to survive in the workforce, it must stay up-to-date and familiar with today's and tomorrow's newest technologies. They strongly believe it is essential for their own company to have compatible technology so they can successfully help bring people with disabilities into the workforce.

National Disability Mentoring Day provides a great opportunity for students and others with disabilities to make connections with employers in order to gain a competitive edge when joining the workforce and eventually contributing to our nation's economic growth.

Employers and consumers who would like to participate in the MRC's upcoming Mentoring Day should contact Kenneth Nicosia via email at kenneth.nicosia@mrc.state.ma.us or by phone at (617) 204-3602.

Women Pioneering the Future

In celebration of Women's History Month, the MRC's Diversity Committee, along with the MRC's Women with Disabilities Standing Committee, sponsored an event entitled "Women Pioneering the Future" on March 6, 2003 at the Brookline Public Library.

Thanks to Donna Suskawicz, Chair of the Women with Disabilities Standing Committee, the audience received a glimpse of the challenges that women, especially women with disabilities, have faced throughout history and still face today. Among the honored guests were Massachusetts State Senator Cynthia Stone Creem, Dr. Mary Mason, Commissioner Elmer Bartels and MRC Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Cindy Purcell.

Senator Creem presented a Senate Resolution recognizing March as Women's History Month. Senator Creem is best known as a champion of criminal justice laws including the enforcement of stricter anti-stalking, sex offender and domestic violence legislation. She also increased funding for breast cancer research and its link with the environment and instituted the "one gun-one month" proposal for active gun control in Massachusetts. In honor of the occasion, the Senator presented a resolution honoring women, the women's movement and women's achievements. She reminded audience members of women's roles in history as abolitionists and civil rights crusaders, and their significant participation throughout the peace movement. Although we have made great progress, she acknowledged we still have a long

struggle ahead in order to promote diversity within companies and among employees. Senator Creem ended with a strong affirmation toward changing the future for the next generation of women.

Next, MRC's own Cindy Purcell, a VR Counselor in the Worcester Area Office, shared her personal story as a woman with a disability. It was a touching and heartfelt display of real-life courage and triumph. So inspirational is her story, that news program giant 20/20 filmed a 15-minute segment all about Cindy and her family. Cindy and her husband Ted were both paralyzed when they were young. Cindy is quadriplegic while Ted has the use of his arms and some upper body strength. Despite challenges, Cindy and Ted felt they could make outstanding accomplishments and live fulfilling independent lives working toward set goals.

For Cindy, a lifelong goal had always been to become a mother. After much debate and consultation with doctors, the couple decided that despite the risks and against all odds, they would have a child. After hearing from Cindy and watching the 15-minute program, it was hard to find a dry eye in the room. Cindy and her husband's determination and love delivered them a healthy happy baby boy, Tanner, now going on six years old. Cindy's dream of becoming a mother has been fulfilled and proves once more that people with disabilities can overcome obstacles and do almost anything a non-disabled person could do. Her message of "don't give up on your dreams" had a lasting impression on the crowd.

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Greater Boston Employer Advisory Board

One of the most successful ways to find satisfactory employment is through the networking process. Establishing a good rapport with business professionals has a crucial place in the job market. At the MRC, this rule holds true. For staff at the Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program, finding employment for consumers *is* their job. It is sometimes difficult to convince employers that people with disabilities are a good hiring choice because of negative stereotypes and myths. How then do we continue to create auspicious employment options for MRC clients? One way has been through the creation of community business advisory boards.

The Greater Boston Employer Advisory Board (GBEAB) is one example of such a group. Their motto is “Reach Higher and Hire” and their mission is “To help the MRC foster and promote mutually beneficial and sustainable relationships between employers and qualified candidates with disabilities.” The GBEAB has been contributing to the employment success of people with disabilities for more than five years by assisting with their placement in the workplace. In the past they have formed partnerships with such prestigious businesses as Harvard University, Raytheon and Partners Health Care, to name only a few.

The GBEAB consists of representatives from the MRC and a long list of companies located not only in Boston, but across the state as well. The Board meets six times a year at different host company locations. Prospective job-ready consumers present their

resumes and credentials for potential employment opportunities, averaging three to four presentations per meeting. Consumers benefit from a variety of services offered by the Board including job matches, employer contacts, resume writing workshops and other career services. Most Board members are human resource professionals, but there are also marketing, media and legislative staffers among the group who offer a myriad of benefits for both consumers and other Board members. The support consumers receive leads to positive work-related experiences such as hiring, informational interviews and resume review.



One of the perks of being a volunteer Board member is the chance for personal and professional networking with other companies. Bringing a group of 40 business professionals together in one room can give someone a “foot in the door” at the various participating organizations. For employers, GBEAB helps link companies with resources preparing to meet the needs of their employees with disabilities. Not only do they get recognition for their diversity efforts, they can also avail themselves of diversity training from MRC staff or other GBEAB members.

Remember, a company hiring a person with a disability through the MRC receives a pre-screened candidate, saving money on recruiters or temp agencies. Employers also receive

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free consultation on issues concerning disabilities and workers with disabilities. All businesses (excluding non-profit organizations) are eligible for federal tax deductions when hiring employees with disabilities.

One example of a typical successful outcome is Bill, an MRC consumer, who wasn't clear about his career goals but had a stated interest in the health care profession. He met with a GBEAB member from Harvard Vanguard for an informational interview, who in turn introduced him to a radiological technician at Harvard's radiology department. After "job shadowing" the technician, Bill made the decision to pursue a career as a radiological technician. The direct job shadow experience in radiology enabled him to make a career decision. He applied for and was accepted into a certificate program for radiology technicians. He later met with a job recruiter from Partner's Health Care, another board member, who advised him on the types of jobs available at Partner's and assisted him in revising his resume. The recruiter, impressed with Bill's skills and very confident about promoting his talents within Partner's, helped him secure a full-time position. The health care industry needs qualified applicants and the MRC can provide trained job ready people.

With the continued dedication and support of VRS professionals at the MRC and the GBEAB, consumers can look forward to more job opportunities in the future. Dispelling myths about workers with disabilities, as well as providing free training and consultation regarding relevant issues, has opened

doors previously closed to people with disabilities in the past. The MRC values the services provided by the GBEAB and is grateful for their continued partnership.

HOME MOD continued from pg. 6

Carol stated, "It's an incredible program. I don't really know what I would've done if I couldn't have stayed in my home and have the support of my neighbors."

Many happy endings have resulted from this program and many more are sure to come.

MRC's Home Modification Loan Program offers a variety of services. People may be eligible for home modification loans with no or low interest in amounts ranging from \$1,000-\$25,000, enabling them to make alterations to their residence catered to the specific needs of their disability.

There are two different types of loans. The first, a deferred payment loan, is where borrowers can choose to defer the principal and make interest-only payments. The second, an amortizing loan, is paid back in monthly installments. Depending on generous household income guidelines, borrowers will qualify for 0% or 3% interest rates. Landlords qualify for a 5% rate for modifications to a home leased to a person with a disability who needs them to live independently.

For more information go to the web site www.state.ma.us/mrc, click on Home Modification Loan Program or contact Anne Lane anne.lane@comcast.net (781-925-4434).

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The next speaker was Mary Mason, Ph.D., and resident scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University.

Her own personal experience with a disability was the subject of her book entitled "Life Prints: A memoir of healing and discovery." However, Dr. Mason took this particular opportunity to talk about her latest project, "Working Against Odds: Disabled Women Speak." This piece was aimed at giving a voice to women with disabilities. For this story, she interviewed female consumers with disabilities from the VR and CS Programs at the MRC. She emphasized society's role in shaping the success of women with disabilities. Some of the topics discussed in her lecture included the low expectations people have for women with disabilities, the "other" stigma: overbearing care giving, and the topic of infantilizing or "babying" women with disabilities (and women in general). The women in her interviews all noted these experiences throughout their lifetimes.

Dr. Mason's lecture was divided into 3 parts: 1) the way we see ourselves; 2) the way others see us; and 3) the way we work. All the stories relayed by Dr. Mason conveyed the themes of confrontation, acceptance and gaining control in one's own life.

This event was a celebration of strength, courage and the struggles of women everywhere. The audience was captivated and impressed with the emotional and informative presentations.

We hope Women's History Month will continue to foster the empowerment of women through programs like these - such lectures are an integral part of continued diversity for MRC and the Commonwealth as a whole.



FAST FACT

According to the 2000 National Organization on Disability Harris Poll, 67% of people with disabilities who are unemployed would rather be working.

Karen Beth Mael **Carballo Award Recipient**

November 11, 2002 proved to be a memorable day for Karen Beth Mael, an employment specialist in the MRC Vocational Rehabilitation Services Brookline office.

Karen Beth was nominated by her supervisors at the MRC to receive the Manual Carballo Award – the state’s highest award presented for the most outstanding performance by a state employee. This award is bestowed upon one out of ten nominated employees statewide and because of her dedication and reputable work, Karen Beth exemplified the perfect candidate.

Karen Beth has remained unwavering in her desire to uphold the MRC-VRS mission - to assist persons with disabilities to gain independence through work. She is a natural leader whose abilities have spearheaded several groundbreaking projects. During her tenure with the MRC, Karen Beth has created innumerable opportunities to help people with disabilities to become successful employees.

Karen Beth helped to organize the first statewide Career Fair for persons with disabilities in 2000. The event was so successful that it inspired the agency to conduct career fairs more often all around the state.

Karen Beth was instrumental in the creation of the Greater Boston Employer Advisory Board (GBEAB). She established a successful partnership between the business community and the MRC, maintaining a steady stream of new employers who are ready and willing to hire qualified consumers. She has

a unique style of networking and building relationships with companies in Massachusetts and has proved to be a valuable asset to all involved in this project. Her vision is inscribed in the GBEAB motto, “Reach Higher and Hire.”

The Carballo Award acknowledges Karen Beth Mael for her outstanding efforts and for personifying the best qualities of a dedicated and compassionate public employee. She has set a shining example of integrity, not-so-quiet determination, utmost professionalism and exemplary job placement techniques.

“This award is about all of us, not just me as an individual,” stated Karen Beth. She believes her accomplishments are due to the team efforts made by everyone at the MRC.

In 2002, Karen Beth again demonstrated her steadfast determination to assist consumers with severe disabilities after being selected by the Town of Brookline to receive its prestigious Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Award recognizing her for her contributions to promoting diversity in employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Congratulations to Karen Beth Mael for her outstanding achievements. We thank her for her continued dedication and inspiration.



2003
Commonwealth Citation for Outstanding Performance Awards

Team Awards

Project Impact Team, Statewide Employment Services

Herminio Miranda, Benefits Specialist
Linda Muse, Benefits Specialist
Shirley O'Connor, Secretary
Matthew Olds, Benefits Specialist
Kimberly Thacker, Benefits Specialist
Marit Young, Benefits Specialist

Payroll Department Team, Human Resources

Carmen Vazquez, Payroll Supervisor
Rita Chan, Time & Attendance Representative
Peter Gandolfo, Time & Attendance Representative

Individual Awards

Malcolm MacNeil, QVRC, Brookline Office
Donna Suskawicz, Secretary, Brookline Office
Jane Lamarre, Secretary, North Adams Office
John Keegan, QVRC, Pittsfield Office
Joseph Connors, VDE, DDS Boston Office

Nominated for the Manuel Carballo Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

Malcolm MacNeil, QVRC, Brookline Office

Nominated for the Eugene H. Rooney, Jr. Public Service Award



Mitt Romney
Governor

Kerry Healy
Lieutenant Governor

Ronald Preston
Secretary
Executive Office of Health
& Human Services

Elmer C. Bartels
Commissioner of Rehabilitation



The *MRC Commissioner's Update* is an external publication disseminated three times a year. It will be made available in alternate formats for individuals with disabilities upon request. The editorial staff welcome any comments on articles, information, suggestions for future articles and recommendations for making this newsletter more responsive to MRC constituents. Editorial staff reserve the right to edit articles and to be selective of requests for inclusion in this publication. Comments and suggestions should be addressed to:

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